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Anti-war Democratic lawmakers call for a Department of Peace

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WASHINGTON - With so much of Washington and the nation focused on war, four dozen anti-war Democrats, including 10 Californians, are trying to make their case for peace - a Cabinet-level Department of Peace to rival the Department of Defense.

"There really is no department within our government that looks at alternatives to war," Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, said Wednesday, dismissing the diplomacy that is the State Department's reason for being.

Lee said the proposal is more than a symbolic gesture against the war in Iraq. She said more voters oppose the war the longer it goes on, and when those voters begin to call their representatives in larger numbers, the bill will gain more support.

"This is a department whose time has come," Lee said.

The idea comes from Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, a presidential candidate, who first introduced the legislation in July 2001.

"This is the moment when we need to ask whether war is inevitable or not," Kucinich said, noting the presence of U.S. troops in the streets of Baghdad and the warnings by senior American officials to Iran and Syria.

The bill has no Republican sponsors and little prospect of advancing. Rep. David Dreier, R-San Dimas, chairman of the Rules Committee, said Congress just created a new Cabinet department for homeland security and is unlikely to add another agency.

The 2001 legislation died in committee and was not given a hearing in the Republican-controlled House.

Kucinich's new bill would create the Peace Department, headed by a secretary of peace and other officials whose duties would include domestic peace activities, international peace activities and peaceful coexistence and nonviolent conflict resolution. The bill also would create a Peace Academy as an alternative to the military service academies and designate Jan. 1 as Peace Day in the United States.

Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Petaluma, said the Department of Peace is the best idea she has heard since she came to Washington in 1993. "I believe that we as human beings are going to self-destruct if we do not find another way," Woolsey said. She also is planning to reintroduce legislation calling on the United States to scrap its entire nuclear arsenal.

She said her stand is popular among her Marin County constituents. "It says to the naysayers, 'Oh my goodness, there are people that expect their representatives to not toe the line,'" Woolsey said.

The other California Democrats sponsoring the legislation are: Rep. Sam Farr of Carmel, Rep. Bob Filner of San Diego, Rep. Mike Honda of San Jose, Rep. George Miller of Martinez, Rep. Hilda Solis of El Monte, Rep. Fortney "Pete" Stark of Fremont, Rep. Maxine Waters of Los Angeles and Rep. Diane Watson of Los Angeles.

The bill is H.R. 1673.

ON THE NET

Rep. Kucinich: <http://www.house.gov/kucinich/issues/peace.htm>

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